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ABSTRACT

Educators and intellectuals with some sense of humanity should comprehend the hidden message inherent in setting up a dichotomy referring to two linguistic/cultural entities: that one set of structures is sufficient; one is not. For the black student, this message of inferiority is communicated both through the teacher in his instruction, assignments, grading procedures, and attitudes, and through the university in its tracking system which extends to society and the job market. To provide the kind of language/composition teaching the minority student needs, a learning environment should be set up in which he gains mastery in obtaining information, reading competently, using language effectively, and organizing concepts verbally--all using the dialect to which he is accustomed. (JM)

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HIDDEN AGENDAS: THE VIEW FROM MINORITY STUDENTS

OR

"KEEP THIS NIGGER BOY RUNNIN"

(Paper delivered at CCCC in Anaheim, California, April, 1974)

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I would like to begin by telling you something of the trials and tribulations endured by two Black English-speaking people who have managed, rather miraculously in the case of one, to negotiate this system and thus survive.

There's a Black linguist at the University of California, Brother Ernie Smith--"Sweet Ernie" as he used to be known in his old hustlin days in the streets--who lived his early life as a Black reject in the educational institutions of America. As a young man, he was sent to a number of rehabilitation institutions for "acting out" (i.e., for what they thought was "serious violations" of the rules). From the Git-go, though, such judgments of Ernie's behavior were based mostly on his linguistic competence, or rather, the lack of such. He was bombarded with a number of labels, all of which appeared on his cum card and followed him wherever he went--labels like "non-verbal," "linguistically deprived," "dyslexia," "lack of auditory discrimination skills," verbally destitute," and so on and so on.

The way you "earn" all these labels is everytime the teacher ask you a question, you come with what you know, that is, you answer in your native Black dialect but you get corrected. You know, the teacher reprimands "Where are your supplies?" and you answer "I ain got none." She corrects not "I ain't got none," "I don't have any." Eventually this kind of student, like Sweet Ernie did, opts for being "non-verbal" that is, for sayin nothin since nothin he say is gon be right noway. And thus the cycle begins, from school to youth homes, to prison and it's a miracle if you get back on the right track.

Now the outcome of my experience as a Black English speaker going through the public schools was naturally different from Sweet Ernie's since being a girl and thus being taught to be passive, subdued, and submissive, I didn't rebel with outright aggressive or defensively withdrawal behavior. Instead I took it and sulked, let the fury bottle up inside of me and went on to college

where wham! I ran into speech correction courses which I had to pass or else be denied the credential I needed to earn my own living and thus keep me and my young son off A.D.C.

What uhm runnin down, then, is bout hidden agendas which use the minority student's language as a tool of oppression. And I cannot stress often enough that all this pedagogical talk of bi-lingual, bi-cultural models, Black English, Chicano dialect, and so on and so on, insiduously conincides with the socio-political movements of the late Fifties and Sixties when Blacks and other minorities—but especially Blacks, initially, since we have been the innovators in contemporary social change strategies—when these outsiders in American life began to demand the entry which native sons should never have been denied. Specifically I'm referring to the Supreme Court desegregation decision of 1954; to Black Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of the bus in 1955; to Martin Luther King's subsequent launching of the Civil Rights Movement; to Malcolm X's push for Black self-determiniation in the early Sixties; to Stokeley Carmichael's call for Black Power in 1966; as well as all the urban rebellions in Newark, Watts, Detroit, etc. In dealing with the forces of this new thrust and the legitimate demands for economic and political participation, the power elite done simply poured the same old wine in new bottles. As educators and intellectuals with supposedly some sense of humanity, we should refuse to participate as the oppressive arm of this managerial machine elite. You see, this is a very complex business and current teaching strategies pushing bi-cultural, bi-dialectal models fail to deal adequately with this hidden message. The minute you set up a dichotomy, call it what you will, community dialect vs. textbook dialect; school talk vs. home talk; standard vs. non-standard; college English vs. non-college English, don't matter what you call the two linguistic/cultural entities, the hidden message comes across: one set of structures is sufficient, the other is not. This is the Black student's per-

ception of what's goin down in language/composition teaching. And the experience and perceptions of the Black student are generally shared by other Third World, minority students.

I'm runnin down to you the view not only from my own experience as a minority student, which is co-signed by the comments of others like myself, such as Sweet Ernie, the University of California f. linguist. But also, on the basis of my on-going research in this area, it seems that students of this generation bees going through the same ol changes that Ernie and I went through. The mechanisms by which this hidden message of linguistic inferiority is conveyed can be broadly categorized in two ways: 1) those of the individual teacher and his set of classroom behaviors; 2) those of the university in its role as a tracking or sorting institution for the power elite of this society.

Even though the message of linguistic inferiority is not stated explicitly, it comes across through implication—via instructions, assignments, grading procedures, and so on. For example, a student receives a paper, bleeding with red ink, and is told to read certain sections in Warriner's, the Harper Handbook, the Harcourt Brace Handbook, or what have you. The sections he is told to read are those which deal with features of Black English syntax, though they don't be labelled as Black English, of course. Or the student receives a paper with some items circled and he is told to correct these thangs and left to his own devices to find out what needs correcting. After looking at several papers like this recently, it's obvious that what's always circled is a set of grammatical/mechanical/punctuation features. Or consider the grading procedure whereby the instructor gives two or sometimes even three--and I just saw a paper the other day with four grades, all of which only confuses the student because in the final analysis, the grades have to be reconciled, and so his usage/mechanics grade ends up influencing his total grade after all. The point is that such teacher be-

haviors begin to form a pattern, and the student is quick to perceive that pattern and the message it it. He begins to notice that those students having trouble in composition classes are almost always the minority students (and don't never think that the students don't compare notes with students in other sections of a given course.) The student's perception is that not only is this an attack on his Blackness via his Black language, but, more importantly, none of this is helping him to git over in attaining his degree from the university, because, despite his presence in comp classes, he continues to have difficulty with writing assignments in sociology, psychology, history, and other courses.

What is the role the institution plays in this process? For one thing, it endorses it by encouraging the placement of minority students in remedial English courses. Some universities have done away with comp requirements but have retained a special writing course for "open admissions," "high potential," low achievement," "Upward bound, "higher horizons," and whatever other kinds of euphemisms exist today for Black, Chicano and other minority students. Some universities still have a comp requirement but allow students to place out of it through placement tests, which are always based, of course, on the model of the predominant culture, and which therefore minority students do poorly on. So in another way, the Black student becomes the victim of university policy. Now, unless you believe Shockley, Jensen, Herrenstein, and the rest of the motley genetic inferiority crew, somebody crazy! Like, either the minority student really is inferior or the instutional model is faulty. I, of course, know the weight belong on the institution cause the university is functioning as an agent to eliminate those whom the power elite defines as unqualified from a now very tight job market, and ultimately from full participation in the society. Like in this society, your survival is tied to the amount of education and training you have.

Two interrelated concerns must be dealt with if we are to provide the kind of language/composition teaching the minority student really needs. First, we

need a philosophy of composition, which speaks to the question: why do this student need this course, which may be different from: why do I, the teacher, think he need it, but it should be the same as: why do he, the student, think he need it? The second concern has to do with models of Black education. Now the current literature about Black students can be subsumed under two headings: people either talk about the deficiencies of the Black so-called culturally deprived child, or they talk about the differences of this student. Now, where uhm comin from, this amounts to the same thing since the differences is never the sort the teacher or the institution can abide. Like, what good is these differences if they only good on Blue Hill Ave in Boston, Mack Street in Detroit, or at the corner of 125th and Seventh in Harlem? I propose a third model, and the folks at Nairobi College, a Black-run institution out here in East Palo Alto, California have a word for it: Excellence. At Nairobi, because they work toward the attainment of Black intellectual excellence and do not get hung up in stigmatizing terms like bi-dialectalism, they are accomplishing something, like teaching the whole community to teach each other to read. To work toward Black Excellence is to transcend the narrow constricting arguments about differences and deficits. The Excellence model asserts that Blacks and other minorities can excel in cognitive/linguistic tasks and teaches toward the acquisition of that Excellence. Specifically, in language/composition teaching, this bees meanin that we by-pass the petty talk bout whether students bees sayin he do or he does, and instead we set up a learning environment whereby he gains mastery in higher order conceptual skills and the ability to articulate his thoughts logically, coherently, with specificity, and WITH WHATEVER NUTS AND BOLTS OF DIALECT HE HAS AT HIS COMMAND.

So now, if you want to know what minority students want/need, you ask them, and that's what I been doin. My experience and current research with Black students indicates the following articulated needs which speak to a philosophy of composition/language instruction. (I done "translated" they responses and

categorized them in terms of language that I/we mutually understand, but the messages are essentially (these r the students.)

1. Competence in obtaining information. That is, knowledge of research tools and methods, sources of information and how to use them. Not simply how to use the library, but research skills, knowledge of journals, what kinds are good for what, and so on. For example, a Black student asked me what happened to the twenty slaves that landed at Jamestown in 1619 on the Good Ship Jesus. She wanted to know where could she find out that kind of information, cause "the book ~~[illegible]~~ don't say."

2. Competence in reading. Critical reading, that is, making inferences and critically reacting to material read, being able to separate your view from the author's, being able to peep the writer's hole card, i.e., diggin on the author's hidden agenda.

3. Competence in using language as a conceptual tool. Now, we know language has both social and purely aesthetic uses. But here students seem to be talking about the cognitive function of language, that is, language as a symbolic mechanism for processing knowledge. English teachers could/should teach students how to apprehend that knowledge through linguistic competencies. Now, this don't mean no lightweight simple stuff like teaching complete sentences as expressions of complete thoughts. (Yeah, some folks still into that!) The best recent example I seen of what uhm tryin to get at here was done not by an English teacher at all, but by a Black graduate student teaching a section of introductory sociology. In introducing concepts like socialization, acculturation, and so on, this teacher broke down the terms in a variety of sentences to make statements about the discipline--in short, she demonstrated how each concept is a handy linguistic tool for approaching the study of social behavior. And not in no lecture method, she had the students interacting with

her, giving examples from they own experiences and using the terms themselves.

4. Competence in organizing concepts into larger units of verbalization. By this I mean relating specific concepts to larger patterns of knowledge, like for example, "what has been the effect of acculturation on Black Americans?" Dealing with an assignment like this involves knowing how to probe the topic, how to shape it to a given audience, it means understanding the task, being able to approach the task efficiently, etc.

After all, a composition course is a process course and we must build the content in, and I'm suggesting that the content can be specifically related to the other areas of knowledge—courses, if you like--that the student is engaged in. Cause, you see, the most commonly articulated need from Black students is that English teachers give them skills to write for other courses. Now, the traditional topics they been given help them none at all in this process. A student came to me the other day, bemoaning the fact that she had been given an assignment to write a descriptive paper on an object or event, and the instructor suggested that they go to the museum and write a description of a painting or object in the museum. "How is this gon help me?" the student righteously lamented.

Now, in some circles, I know what uhm runnin down amounts to heresy, to suggest that composition be a "service" course or "merely" a skills course, but in point of fact, that used to be its reason for being, although though we would never admit it, and maybe that's one of the reasons why we did the job so badly. Apparently also university administrators done begun to think that just maybe comp teachers ain doin they jobs too well and are thus erasing that across-the-board English comp requirement, except for Black and other minority students, that is--and that's the rub I been rappin bout. Further, I am not unmindful of the theory held by some that writing should be a "liberating activity," a consciousness building thing, but writing as therapy just ain the Black student's Thang. His "T-Group" done been the Oral Tradition that is embodied in the rap sessions at

the crib or on the corner. And he got his Black Consciousness Thang together back in the Sixties; now he wants to be able to deal on the society/system with his new sense of self. So unlike the uptight, "uptaught" student, he is pretty much in touch with himself and free of the psychological hang-ups of the white, middle class student. BUT he is still enslaved in other important ways.

this Black student is looking for political and economic liberation and perceives his university credential as a step toward the goal of liberation. Thus he is likely to dismiss as irrelevant composition teaching not geared toward equipping him with the necessaries for his university survival kit. And maybe such "instruction" should be so dismissed. Because the Black student is still being confronted with composition as it traditionally done been mistaught, and with language teaching that is still hell-bent on the eradication of he do's and I be's. For this minority student of the Seventies, as it was for me and Sweet Ernie in the Fifties, such teaching becomes just another obstacle course whose hidden agenda is, in the words of Ralph Ellison, "keep this nigger boy runnin."